

# Fulfilling the Promise of Preschool for All

## Insights into Issues Affecting Access for Selected Immigrant Groups in Chicago

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## Executive Summary

In July 2006, Illinois passed landmark legislation designed to ensure access for all 3- and 4-year-old children to quality early childhood education to help prepare them for a strong start in life.<sup>1</sup> This program is on the path to full implementation, though is not yet funded at levels to be available to all 3- and 4-year-olds. As the program is being rolled out, one critical issue facing those involved in trying to make *Preschool for All* (PFA) a reality is to identify what needs to be done to make sure that the first cornerstone—“access for all”—is realized. Failing to make sure that the most vulnerable children participate in the program runs the risk of simply widening the achievement gap, as other children around them move forward and benefit from the quality early childhood services. As a result, it is essential to move beyond simply making programs available to children whose families face particular barriers to participation and to take steps to address the range of barriers—some personal to the families, some policy-related—that may prevent a family from enrolling in, or staying enrolled in, a preschool program.

Children with at least one immigrant parent are of particular concern to early childhood leaders and policymakers in Illinois. These children make up a significant and growing proportion of the children in Illinois. Between 1990 and 2007, the proportion of children in Illinois younger than age 6 who had one or more foreign-born parents rose from 14 to 27 percent. Almost all these children were U.S. citizens.<sup>2</sup> Even though children of immigrants are likely to face particular challenges at school and are likely to benefit from early childhood education services if they enroll, they also face unique challenges and barriers to accessing such services (Matthews and Jang 2007). Many children of immigrants are also English language learners, a group the PFA program sees as of particular focus.

Because of the importance of this issue, the Joyce Foundation funded Urban Institute researchers to conduct a two-part study to examine challenges facing children of immigrants in accessing the Illinois *Preschool for All* program. The first phase gathered information on concerns that policymakers had about immigrant children’s access to prekindergarten in Illinois, while the second phase involved conducting a small study on the barriers and opportunities around accessing the PFA program facing *lower-incidence* immigrant families. Lower-incidence immigrant groups are those that are not as numerous as Mexican immigrants, the largest single immigrant group in Chicago, or immigrants from Latin America, who make up about half the immigrant population in Illinois.<sup>3</sup>

UI researchers studied families from Nigeria and Pakistan living on Chicago's North Side to examine their experiences and perspectives around accessing the PFA program.<sup>4</sup> We conducted two focus groups with parents with preschool-age children from each immigrant group, including parents whose children were enrolled in prekindergarten programs and parents whose children were not. We also spoke with some PFA providers in the same community for their perspective on the issues raised by the families.

The report lays out the findings of this study. However, these findings should be seen as exploratory rather than conclusive and should not be assumed to reflect the experiences of even all families from these immigrant groups in this community, much less in the rest of Chicago or the rest of the state. Instead, these findings reflect insights gathered from a relatively small number of families and providers from just two of the many lower-incidence immigrant groups in one small area of Chicago. Nonetheless, the experiences of the families and providers in this study provide many interesting insights to consider in developing policy for the general PFA program and useful avenues for further exploration as policymakers consider how to strengthen the program to better serve all children.

## Findings and Policy Implications

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This study raises interesting issues for the early childhood community. Below we briefly summarize findings in 11 different areas, as well as the policy implications that should be considered, where appropriate.

***Population Demographic Characteristics:*** The two populations of immigrant parents interviewed for this study have some important similarities and differences in their characteristics. In both groups, most participants were women and most were mothers, but the Pakistani focus groups included some grandmothers. While on average the Pakistani respondents were older, this stemmed from the inclusion of grandmothers; the mothers had similar ages across the two groups. The Pakistani respondents were much less likely to speak English, while the Nigerian respondents all spoke English (though Nigerians who do not speak English also live in the Chicago area). The Nigerian respondents were much more likely to be working (with a significant subset working full time) than the Pakistani respondents, who mostly did not work or only worked part time. Pakistani families were more explicit about their Muslim identity and affiliation, an issue which was not raised by the Nigerian respondents though there are Nigerian Muslims in Chicago. While we did not collect information on respondent income, we recruited lower-income families for the study across both groups. In addition, while we did not ask parent respondents about their citizenship status (given the sensitivity of the information), the recruiters told us that the families included a mix of immigrants with and without legal residency.

- ***Policy Implications:*** These characteristics provide important context for the findings described below, including the forms of care families use, the kinds of barriers they face, and issues of cultural sensitivity. In addition, the noted differences in characteristics across the

two groups highlight the variation in the realities facing families from different immigrant groups even if they live in the same general neighborhood, and underscore the importance of not assuming that immigrant families face homogeneous situations because of their immigrant status.

**Forms of Care Used:** PFA allows prekindergarten funds to be used in different settings, including school-based programs—mostly offered on a part-day (2.5 hours) and school-year schedule—and community-based child care programs that operate on a full-working-day, full-year basis. Because of the different work patterns of the two populations, the types of care used by the two immigrant groups in the study differed significantly. Almost all Pakistani families whose children were in prekindergarten programs enrolled their children in school-based settings, while almost all Nigerian respondents had their children enrolled in community-based child care programs that provided full-working-day services. This fundamental difference had major implications for how the two groups experienced PFA services.

- **Policy Implications:** While more specific policy issues are raised below, an overarching theme illustrated in this study is that working families that use the PFA program in community-based child care settings and families with nonworking parents that use the PFA program in school-based settings have very different views on prekindergarten programs, the setting their children are enrolled in, and barriers they face. Policy efforts to address barriers to PFA enrollment for working families should also focus on addressing barriers affecting the ability of families to enroll in *child care*, including, in particular, their ability to access child care/early education funding and programs that can help them afford or receive care.

**Knowledge of PFA:** A common barrier to participation is the lack of knowledge about the program—do parents know it exists and that they can enroll their children? Our study found that many families whose children were not enrolled in PFA were unfamiliar with the program. However, interestingly, we also found that a number of families whose children were enrolled in prekindergarten programs—especially those enrolled through community-based child care settings—were also unfamiliar with PFA or did not know whether their children were enrolled in the program. This confusion seems to come largely from the fact that for community-based providers, PFA supplements their core funding and allows them to enhance the quality of their services but does not seem to have a separate identity. These providers do not market the fact they have PFA funds, and the enrollment process for parents is intertwined with subsidies and Head Start. In contrast, families enrolled in school-based programs, and the providers themselves, were much more familiar with PFA and its purpose. In at least one program, staff were unaware that their program received funding from PFA, which—if true more widely—may provide some explanation for why parents were unaware of the program.

- **Policy Implications:** This finding raises interesting questions for policymakers and early care and education leaders. In particular, is it important that PFA have a separate identity that is known to families and providers? Is it important for families to know they are using PFA and—in cases where it is one of several funding streams being blended for providers—

for providers to market the program separately? Or is it important that families know how to find and enroll their children in care that has certain attributes? While this study suggests that many parents may not know about PFA, it is unclear if unfamiliarity is a problem that results in families not accessing the service. This issue is worthy of additional discussion and exploration.

**Value of Preschool Education:** One common question is whether parents understand the value of early education for 3- and 4-year-olds, or whether the first challenge is to convince them of its importance. The respondents from both immigrant groups were very positive about the importance of early education for this age group, regardless of whether they were participating in the program or if their children were enrolled in any form of early education. Further, parents' perspectives on the program suggest that they valued it because they understood it could help their children be ready for school and become educated. Interestingly, Pakistani and Nigerian families have very different contexts for early education from their countries of origin; while Pakistani families may have been aware of early education in Pakistan (where almost half of 3–5-year-old young children are enrolled in preprimary education), early education is much less common in Nigeria, where only 15 percent of 3- to 5-year-old children are enrolled in education programs.

- **Policy Implications:** If this finding is true for the broader population of Pakistani and Nigerian families in Chicago and the rest of Illinois, then outreach efforts may not need to focus as much on convincing these families of the importance of early care and education for their preschool-age children. Instead, it might be more useful to focus on helping families understand that PFA programs can help them obtain something they already value for their children.

**Supply of PFA Programs or Slots:** Another common barrier is inadequate slots to meet demand. This issue, and the issue of investing in capital expenditures to expand the supply, has been a focus of significant policy discussion in Illinois. Our study suggests that assessing the supply of care is somewhat complicated by families' care choices. Specifically, whether the families we interviewed perceived a shortage of care depended on the type of care they were using. Pakistani families, who were far more likely to enroll their children in the school-based programs, spoke much more about not being able to get into a school, and facing waiting lists—a perspective corroborated by the school-based providers we talked with. Nigerian respondents were less likely to report such problems—though it is important to remember that they didn't necessarily seek a PFA program but instead were looking for a child care program that met their needs, and that they may have enrolled their children at younger ages. Instead, the Nigerian respondents were much more likely to talk about whether they could find the right child care program for them, whether they could afford it, and whether they could obtain subsidies to pay for it, rather than any problem accessing PFA.

- **Policy Implications:** Parents wanting to use school-based programs (primarily families with at least one nonworking parent) apparently felt the supply of accessible school-based PFA programs in their community in Chicago was inadequate. However, the picture is less clear



for working families that relied on community-based child care settings. These families were instead more likely to discuss challenges in finding child care than with finding PFA, given that they didn't appear to search out PFA programming. As a result, despite the fact that some community-based providers had vacancies, it is unclear whether this actually indicated a sufficient supply of PFA-supported slots for low-income working parents, as the vacancies could have been caused by families having difficulty enrolling for other reasons (such as being able to afford child care). More exploration of this issue would be worthwhile, as would further discussion of how to best assess whether the supply of PFA-supported care in community-based settings is adequate given that these funds are so closely intertwined with other funds. It would also be useful to examine whether these issues play out differently in other parts of the state. These questions can provide important information needed for developing, funding, and implementing programs that best meet the needs of families.

**Transportation Barriers:** Getting children to the programs also can create challenges for parents, depending on their transportation options. Nigerian respondents did not mention transportation as an issue and were more likely to report driving or walking their children to school. In contrast, Pakistani respondents were much more likely to discuss transportation barriers as a major concern for their ability to attend PFA or prekindergarten programs, as many of them did not have cars or drive. In fact, many Pakistani respondents together had hired someone to drive their children to school—a costly option for them, reaching \$70–100 a month. The problems noted by Pakistani respondents may be in part because they used school-based programs, and schools are geographically dispersed by design, so a family that can't get into its local program is likely to have to travel farther—a reality which is not necessarily true for community-based child care programs.

- **Policy Implications:** Transportation issues may create a barrier for some families to participate in PFA programs—particularly if a family cannot get into its neighborhood school and has to enroll in one farther away. It is worth examining whether this issue creates particular barriers for immigrant families who are more isolated, have less access to cars or public transportation, or may face language barriers in accessing transportation schedules (GAO 2005).

**Enrollment Barriers:** Ease of enrollment is also a common factor affecting program participation. When asked about the enrollment process, three issues emerged:

- **Language barriers:** The Pakistani families in our study discussed how language barriers made it difficult for them to enroll and described having to work with local community agencies to help them with the forms. Although our Nigerian respondents all spoke English and so did not mention language barriers, PFA providers described these issues affecting other Nigerian families who were English language learners.
- **Policy Implications:** This finding corroborates other research highlighting the importance of both translating materials into other languages and working closely

with immigrant-serving organizations that can reach out to families and help them with the process requirements (Matthews and Jang 2007). While some PFA experts believe it is common for schools and community-based programs to have access to someone speaking the languages of the parents in the community, this may not always be true, or it may not function effectively for all parents.

- *Enrollment logistics:* The Pakistani and Nigerian families reported different enrollment issues. The Pakistani respondents—who were enrolled in school-based programs—did not report any problems with the amount of information required or the process, other than the language issues mentioned above. In contrast, the Nigerian families were likely to talk about the challenges of enrolling—but not for PFA. Instead, they discussed the challenges they faced with enrolling in the local child care programs, which could involve applying for subsidies and/or Head Start plus (in some cases) whatever enrollment paperwork or processes the child care program itself required. Providers also identified this issue. Among those who responded to this question, school-based providers reported that it took 30–45 minutes for families to enroll in PFA, while community-based child care programs reported that enrollment took two hours given the paperwork required for subsidies or Head Start.
- *Policy Implications:* It is important to focus on enrollment logistics across the different systems when considering possible barriers for PFA enrollment. Given that low-income working families will most likely need to enroll in the subsidy system or Head Start to be able to afford the full-day services they need, any logistical challenges or barriers in those systems will by definition also limit families’ ability to access the PFA services. It would be useful, therefore, to closely examine the paperwork required to enroll in the child care subsidy program and/or the Head Start program to see whether it could be simplified.<sup>5</sup>
- *Social Security Numbers:* Finally, research has found that asking parents for Social Security Numbers (SSNs) as part of the enrollment process can deter families who are concerned about revealing their immigrant status. While we did not ask parents directly about this issue because of the sensitivity of the question, we did ask providers. Although official PFA policy does not require or request families to provide SSNs to participate, we found variation both across and within provider types as to whether they asked families to provide this form of identification. Community-based child care programs were more likely to report requesting parents to provide their SSN when enrolling in their program, apparently because they needed to confirm the parents’ employment for the purposes of obtaining a subsidy. However, in accordance with the Federal Privacy Act, applicants for child care subsidies are not required to give SSNs.<sup>6</sup> Requiring SSNs was rarer among schools, though one school-based provider reported requesting this information from parents because a school administrator had asked them to do so. However, this is not PFA policy, and schools are not allowed to require SSNs, which suggests that either the provider was mistaken or the administrator was not following appropriate policy.

- ***Policy Implications:*** The PFA program should establish and enforce a policy making clear to local programs that collecting SSNs is not required and encouraging them to not request them of parents. It would also be useful to assess whether in some cases SSNs are being requested for child care subsidies or for Head Start, and to issue a clear statement across systems on this issue. Further, the state could also put out materials in different languages, and work with immigrant-serving organizations, to dispel myths and clarify enrollment requirements and immigrant eligibility.

***Cultural Responsiveness:*** Respondents provided mixed messages on the relative importance of the programs being culturally sensitive—for example, having staff from Nigeria or Pakistan, or having any staff who spoke Urdu or languages spoken by the Nigerian families—in affecting their participation. Some respondents reported not expecting having staff from their country or who spoke their language, but others talked about how more families would come to the program if such staff existed. A number of providers seemed to have had access to individuals who spoke the relevant languages, or individuals from those countries, though not all the providers had such staff, and if they did they were not necessarily teaching staff. Agency staff commented on their efforts to help staff be culturally sensitive and on the great cultural diversity within classrooms. Also, interestingly, Pakistani parents talked about the importance of having programs respect and support their Muslim religious practices, such as Halal food and prayers—and that failure to do so made enrollment less likely for some parents. In particular, some parents mentioned programs not meeting their dietary requirements.

- ***Policy Implications:*** Helping programs be more culturally aware and responsive, and hiring staff who have similar cultural identities or backgrounds, can be an important way to appeal to families. While this can be challenging with lower-incidence immigrant groups, both providers and families acknowledged positive efforts made by programs. However, the comments of our respondents suggest that additional steps could be taken. For example, programs could further improve their cultural congruence by formalizing the role of parents or other cultural mediators (such as local religious or immigrant-serving organizations) to support staff around issues of cultural sensitivity. Also, broadening cultural responsiveness to include more dialogue with families about their specific religious practices and beliefs and how programs can be more responsive can be important.

***Actual Costs to Parents:*** While the PFA program is designed to be free or only involve minimal fees, some respondents noted concerns about the cost. The Nigerian families enrolled in the community-based programs did not expect the program to be free as they were enrolled in full-time child care. However, some Pakistani families who were schools reported having to purchase supplies and other incidentals, and finding these costs challenging.

- ***Policy Implications:*** Asking parents to pay for supplies is problematic for a program that is trying to encourage voluntary enrollment among low-income children. PFA experts reported that parents should not be required to pay anything to have their child in PFA,

though some schools do so. This issue should be further scrutinized to assess how often parents are asked to pay, and whether such costs deter poor families from enrollment.

**Convenience of Schedules:** A number of Pakistani parents discussed the challenges created for them by the short schedules (2 ½ hours) of the school-based programs. Some parents wanted to be able to work and found coordinating their work schedule with the partial school day particularly challenging. However, even some of those who didn't want to work found the short hours difficult.

- **Policy Implications:** Whether school schedules might deter some families from enrolling—particularly those who face multiple demands on their time -- should be examined further. This is particularly important given that the program is voluntary, so any disincentive can affect participation. However, expanding the hours served with PFA funds would reduce the number of children served unless the expansion was accompanied by additional funds.

**Fear of Government:** Fear of government agencies can be a powerful barrier to enrollment among families who have any reason to be concerned about deportation or the legality of their situation. This is true even if the children were born in this country and are citizens as their parents or other relatives may not have legal documentation. Further, this fear can permeate families and communities with legal documentation owing to mistrust of government, confusion over consequences of accessing public benefits, and anti-immigrant sentiment. However, questions on this issue are challenging to ask of parents, given the sensitivity of the situation, so the information we received should be interpreted with some caution.

While many parents in this study reported that they did not see fear of government agencies as a barrier to participation for other immigrant parents, one Nigerian focus group did discuss this issue. Providers also reported that they did not feel that this was a huge barrier, although these providers probably would not ever see those families for whom fear of the government was a major barrier. However, the individuals we used to recruit families reported that parents in their communities were very concerned about this issue and that parents would probably not have been comfortable being open about this issue to the Urban Institute research team. This issue needs further exploration.

- **Policy Implications:** This issue is a challenging one as in many ways the climate of fear for immigrants is outside the control of PFA administrators. However, it suggests that greater efforts need to be made to make clear to applicants that PFA enrollment information will not be used for any purpose other than enrollment, and to work with trusted intermediaries who can help calm parents fears to the greatest extent possible.

## Conclusions

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If the findings of this study are true in other parts of Chicago and the state, it suggests that the PFA program could be changed in several ways to facilitate enrollment among immigrant populations. The findings also underscore the importance of talking with families about their experiences, and of not assuming that the experiences of any particular immigrant group would be identical to the experiences of another. Some larger lessons from this study include these six:

- Some immigrant families face barriers to participating in the PFA program. However, immigrant families are clearly not homogeneous, and the differences in their experiences are likely to be driven by other realities of their lives. As a result of these barriers, ensuring access to immigrant families requires moving away from assumptions that all immigrant families have similar problems, and that their problems can be addressed with universal solutions. This underscores the importance of talking with families in different immigrant groups to help understand their particular experiences.
- Although small, this study corroborates challenges raised by other research on immigrants and services, including language barriers, requirements for enrollment, the importance of cultural sensitivity and responsiveness in programs, and fear of interacting with government agencies. It also supports the suggestions of other research that in order to address these problems and to build trust, it is particularly important to work with trusted mediators and to create ongoing relationships with intermediary organizations that serve immigrant families.
- *At least for this group of parents*, there was no need to convince them of the importance of early education for their 3- and 4-year-olds. They wanted their children to be ready for school. Their language about what that meant and why it was important was similar to that used by early childhood educators and professionals. It would be interesting to explore the sources of their beliefs about early education, and whether their beliefs are related to their own educational level and/or early education experiences in their birth countries. *If this finding is also true more broadly for these immigrant populations, or for other immigrant groups*, it suggests that it may be less important to focus on convincing parents of the importance of preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds than to focus on helping them access what is available.
- This study also identified additional barriers that have been often found in previous research about low-income and vulnerable families. These include lack of knowledge about the service, challenges with inadequate supply (at least of school-based options), transportation barriers, logistical challenges associated with enrollment for community-based child care programs, and subsidies, costs, and schedules. However, many of these issues, while not specific to the immigrant community, are even more challenging for immigrants given issues around language, fear, and so forth. Some of these issues may be related to the fact that the initiative was not fully funded.

- The research also highlighted some other barriers that are not as commonly discussed:
  - Parents who are working and whose children are enrolled in community-based child care PFA programs seem to face different challenges and barriers than those enrolled in school-based programs. Specifically, their barriers to accessing services are those associated with child care—such as cost, child care subsidy eligibility policies, and logistical requirements associated with enrollment or redetermination) are by definition barriers to their ability to access PFA. This suggests that any effort to reduce barriers to PFA use for working parents needs to address barriers to subsidy and access to full-time child care—an issue that is particularly challenging given current budget challenges.
  - The concerns from some parents about programs not being sufficiently sensitive to their religious practices and beliefs highlights the importance of including religious beliefs in any discussion of helping programs become more culturally sensitive.
- Finally, the differences and similarities across these two groups in this particular part of Chicago raise important questions for further research. How closely do the initial findings on these two groups reflect realities of other Nigerian and Pakistani parents in other parts of Chicago and Illinois? To what extent do they reflect the realities of other immigrant groups in Chicago, and/or in the rest of the state? How do factors such as language, race/ethnicity, religious identity, length of time in the United States, size and strength of their immigrant community, and level of isolation, play out for different groups? Can adjusting key policy parameters or program strategies make the program more accessible to these groups—either through common immigrant-focused strategies, or through more targeted strategies focused on the needs of particular immigrant groups? Are these issues important to the early education policymakers of Illinois, and will they result in changes to the PFA initiative or its implementation?

In short, these findings suggest that low-incidence immigrant families can face a number of barriers to access and enrollment of their children in the Preschool for All program. While some barriers they face are unique to their immigration status, others are experienced by other low-income and vulnerable families as well. The fact that many of these barriers corroborate findings in other research on immigrant and/or low-income families suggests a sustained effort to address the barriers highlighted in this report improve participation for vulnerable children in general, as well as children of immigrants. As a result, it seems likely that efforts to address the issues raised by these families would indeed help the PFA fulfill its promise of making prekindergarten services available to *all* children.



## Introduction

In July 2006, Illinois passed landmark legislation designed to ensure access for all 3- and 4-year old children to quality early childhood education to help prepare them for a strong start in life.<sup>7</sup> This legislation created the *Preschool for All* (PFA) program, which builds upon a significant existing state commitment to preschool for at-risk children. It has the key components needed to succeed in its goals: it focuses on ensuring access, raising quality, developing a comprehensive perspective on school readiness, and building on the range of providers and funding sources in communities across the state (box 1). However, as advocates and policymakers in Illinois know, passing the legislation is only the first step. The program is on the path to full implementation but is not yet funded at levels to serve all children in the target age group.

In addition to funding, many other issues need to be addressed during implementation if this initiative is to successfully reach its goals. One critical issue facing those involved in PFA is to identify what needs to be done to ensure that the first cornerstone—“access for all”—is realized. In particular, it is challenging to ensure access and participation among children whose families face the greatest barriers to participation, especially given that the preschool programs are voluntary. However, failing to ensure that the most vulnerable children participate in the program runs the risk of simply widening the achievement gap, as other children around them move forward and benefit from the quality early childhood services. As a result, it is essential to move beyond simply making programs available to children whose families face particular barriers to participation, and to take steps to address them.

Children with at least one immigrant parent are one population of particular concern to early childhood leaders and policymakers in Illinois. These children make up a significant and growing proportion of the children in Illinois. Between 1990 and 2007, the proportion of children in Illinois younger than age 6 who had one or more foreign-born parents rose from 14 to 27 percent. Almost all these children were U.S. citizens.<sup>8</sup> Even though children of immigrants are likely to face particular challenges at school and are likely to benefit from early childhood education services if they enroll, they also face unique challenges and barriers to accessing such services (Matthews and Jang 2007). Many children of immigrants are also English language learners, a group that is a particular focus of the PFA program.

## Preschool for All

### *What is it?*

Preschool for All (PFA) is a part-day (2 ½ hours for up to five days a week) early childhood education program for 3- and 4-year-olds in Illinois. The program is voluntary to families and is designed to be a high-quality preschool option for all children—especially those at risk of academic failure. PFA was implemented in 2006 and is free to parents. Some key components include

- curriculum that meets Illinois Early Learning Standards,
- set teacher credential and training standards,
- a maximum staff-child ratio of 1 to 10, and
- additional features including screening and professional development.

### *Whom does it target?*

The program is intended to serve all 3- and 4-year-olds, but it gives priority to children at risk of academic failure. At-risk children are defined as “those who, because of their home and community environment, are subject to such language, cultural, economic, and like disadvantages to be at risk of academic failure” (Illinois State Board of Education 2009, 21). This may include, but is not limited to, children from low-income or homeless families, children in foster care, or children who do not speak English as their primary language. Programs and communities have some flexibility, however, in establishing appropriate at-risk eligibility criteria and determinations.

### *How is it funded?*

PFA is a component of Illinois’ Early Childhood Block Grant and is state-funded through general revenue funds. Providers apply yearly for the PFA grant through an application process and are selected based on demonstrated capacity to meet program standards.

### *What do the funds cover?*

While often described as a “program,” PFA could also be characterized as a funding stream; potential providers apply for funding that will cover aspects of PFA programming but will not support overall operational costs. For example, PFA funding may support

- teacher salaries (certified teachers, teacher’s aides, and substitutes);
- software, supplies, and curriculum materials;
- furniture and equipment; and
- staff development activities including workshop and conference fees/costs.

Funds may be used toward expenses incurred while implementing and operating PFA, but not toward services, salaries, or goods that had been funded by other sources before the PFA grant. Importantly, PFA funding supports existing early education infrastructures; it does not fund the establishment of new child care centers, schools, or programs.

### *Where is it offered?*

PFA may be offered in various early childhood education settings including public schools and child care programs (center-based, as well as home-based in some cases).



*How much of the day does PFA cover?*

Although the settings may offer part-day or full-day child services, PFA is restricted to the 2 ½ hour educational component, which is free to all families. Families enrolled in part-day programs do not pay additional fees for PFA. Families enrolled in full-day programs, however, must cover the remainder of the day as they would otherwise through alternative means (e.g., child care subsidies if they qualify, or paying out of pocket).

*How does PFA differ across settings?*

Although providers are selected through a competitive application process and must comply with standard PFA guidelines, the type of setting—particularly school-based versus community-based—contributes to differences in how PFA is administered. One primary distinction is that full-day programs must support the costs of their non-PFA hours through other means. This often requires blending diverse funding sources, which may have significance for what parents understand about the program. Whereas school-based programs may be readily identifiable as preschool (and may even be known by some as Preschool for All), families in full-day programs may not always be aware that the educational component of their child care program is preschool or Preschool for All. In the findings, we consider this distinction and some potential implications.

Because of the importance of this issue, the Joyce Foundation funded researchers from the Urban Institute to examine challenges facing children of immigrants in accessing the Illinois *Preschool for All* (PFA) program. In this two-stage project, we first talked with a broad range of policymakers in Chicago and Illinois to identify their specific concerns about children of immigrants in accessing the PFA program, and to identify research questions that they felt could benefit from a focused study by our organization. Those conversations produced several questions flagged as worthy of further exploration. With the input of key stakeholders and experts, we then narrowed this list down to one question that seemed to be of particular interest—specifically, to examine the barriers and opportunities facing *lower-incidence* immigrant families around accessing the PFA program. Lower-incidence immigrant groups are those that are not as numerous as Mexican immigrants, the largest single group of immigrants in Chicago, or immigrants from Latin America overall, who make up almost half the immigrant population in Illinois.<sup>9</sup> [Note that Latin America includes Central and South America, as well as immigrants from Mexico.]

While there is much still to learn about issues facing immigrants from Latin America as well, early childhood experts felt that the lack of information about how access issues play out for other immigrant groups presented a serious challenge to their ability to develop policies to meet the needs of these groups. Experts also noted that having information on other immigrant groups, as well as being able to bring this information together with what is known about Latino immigrant families, would provide critical information for those working to strengthen PFA for vulnerable immigrant families in Chicago and Illinois.

In response to these concerns, the Urban Institute conducted a small study of families from Nigeria and Pakistan in the Chicago area to examine their experiences and perspectives around

accessing the PFA program. This report provides an overview of the findings from our focus groups with families from these communities, as well as with some of the PFA providers in the community in which these families lived. It is important to recognize that these findings are exploratory rather than conclusive, as they reflect focus groups with a relatively small number of families (and interviews with a relatively small number of providers) from just two of the many lower-incidence immigrant groups in one area in Chicago.

# *Background*

## Understanding the Issue

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To understand the importance of these issues, and to provide important context for the questions we examined in this project, it is useful to first lay out what is known about the factors that can limit preschool participation in general, and then to look at the particular issues facing children of immigrants around accessing early childhood services. Both sets of issues are important to examine in any research on access, as children of immigrants and families face the same challenges as other children and families, but also may have additional barriers related to their immigrant status. Each of these is described below.

### What Factors Can Affect Access and Participation in Preschool?

A range of factors can affect whether a child participates in an early childhood education program. Some of these are individual factors such as whether parents know about the availability of the preschool program, whether they want their child to attend, and whether they are motivated and/or capable to take the time and effort necessary to enroll their child. These issues are in turn often related to parent characteristics (i.e., language and cultural background, prior experience, knowledge about services, mental health, literacy, levels of trust of government agencies), their perceptions of program characteristics (which is related to, but not identical to, actual program characteristics); and whether the parent faces other barriers, either perceived or real, to enrolling or staying enrolled. Such barriers can include issues such as work schedules, language, immigration status, special needs in the parent or the child, transportation, and so on, that can affect initial or ongoing enrollment.

A number of program and policy factors can affect participation. These include, for example, whether there is space available in a program in a convenient location; whether the program engages in outreach, in particular to populations that face extra barriers; what parents have to do to enroll their child, and whether the enrollment process recognizes the particular barriers faced by some families (e.g., language, work hours, transportation); and whether policies in other program areas can affect the ease of enrollment—for example, for working families, their ability to access public preschool is likely to depend on their ability to obtain subsidies for the child care costs associated with enrolling a child in a full-working-day program. It also includes

issues such as whether the program meets the particular needs of the child and family (e.g., hours of care offered, the quality of the service, language and cultural capacity, resources and experience working with children with different cultural backgrounds, the ethnic and cultural background of the staff, etc.); and whether it is easy for a family to stay enrolled. This is a particular challenge for children whose lives are mobile, or who are in settings where part of the payment comes from subsidies and whose participation is dependent upon the parent remaining eligible for child care subsidies.

In considering these issues, it is important to recognize that these individual and policy factors clearly interact. For example, the level of outreach can affect whether information acts as a barrier; programs with easy enrollment processes or that have resources to meet the special needs of families can improve participation among families that are less capable of making a significant effort to enroll their child. However, these factors can also interact to severely limit participation in preschool services, and they are unfortunately particularly likely to be in play for those children who are at greatest risk of school failure. For example, they can create particular barriers to access for parents who have limited English proficiency, who have complex or changing work situations (such as nontraditional work hours), who have other risk factors (depression, low education levels, disabilities), who live in communities with few resources, or whose children face particular challenges such as disabilities or behavior problems (Adams, Zaslow, and Tout 2007).

These factors also can play out differently for different types of programs. In particular, one key characteristic of the Illinois *Preschool for All* program is that it builds upon the breadth of early childhood education venues in local communities, including public and private schools, child care centers, licensed family child care homes, private preschools, park districts, faith-based organizations, and other community agencies. However, these diverse provider types are likely to differ significantly in how accessible they are, and in what ways. For example, while perspectives differed across respondents, community leaders suggested that compared with school-based providers, community-based providers may be perceived differently by parents and may have different experiences or resources to meet the needs of families that face special barriers such as language or disabilities. In addition, the ability of parents to access these community-based providers, who usually charge fees for the non-PFA portion of the day, depends on the subsidy system and the policies and practices associated with that program (Adams, Snyder, and Sandfort 2002).

Consequently, understanding these factors (particularly, how they play out in the *Preschool for All* context for different populations and service providers) and developing strategies to address them is critical to meet the goal of universal access to the program. These questions form the backbone of our research design.

## Why Focus on Children of Immigrants, and of Lower-Incidence Immigrants in Particular?

In addition to working to address the issues that can affect access of all children, the early childhood community has reason to focus on addressing access barriers that affect the children of immigrants, regardless of their parents' country of origin. To begin with, quality prekindergarten programs can enhance children's math, language, and social skills (Illinois Early Learning Council 2006) and reduce deficits in school achievement (Takanishi 2004), which is especially critical for children of immigrants who may be at higher risk of school failure. However, children of immigrants can face unique barriers to accessing early childhood services (Matthews and Jang 2007), though more research is needed in this area.

Specifically, research on immigrant access to prekindergarten programs focusing on Latino immigrants families (or on immigrant families generally) has found that obstacles to participation by immigrant families include demographic factors, language limitations, and immigration status:

- As newcomers in many communities, immigrants may be unaware of early education opportunities or misunderstand the structure of prekindergarten and other options in the United States. Many live in two-parent families, where the mother has limited employment opportunities or may choose to stay at home to provide child care (Capps, Fix, Ost et al. 2005).
- Limited English proficiency can also hinder knowledge of and access to early education programs, as services or information may not be available in the parents' native language. This can make it harder for parents to know about the program, and can make the programs less desirable as parents are not able to communicate with staff (Matthews and Jang 2007).
- A parent's immigration status, particularly among the undocumented, can prevent parents from pursuing public early learning opportunities, even when their children would be permitted legally to participate (Matthews and Ewen 2006). Studies have shown that undocumented parents often fear deportation or other immigration consequences if they interact with government agencies, and are reluctant to ask for assistance for their children even when the children are U.S. citizens and therefore eligible for services (Holcomb et al. 2003).

Understandably, most research has reflected the experiences of Latino families or Latino immigrant families, who make up the largest segment of immigrants to the United States and 48 percent of all the foreign-born immigrants in Illinois.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Illinois is one of the most culturally diverse in the nation, with the fifth-largest population of English language learner school children (Capps, Fix, Murray et al. 2005). It is home to many families from around the world, and its diversity is especially evident in schools and child care centers in Chicago. In 2007, among the estimated 1.4 million immigrants who resided in the metropolitan Chicago area, 26 percent were European, and 23 percent were Asian.<sup>11</sup> Many were from nations such as Poland,

India, the Philippines, and China, and a substantially growing number were from Ghana, Nigeria, and Pakistan (Paral and Norkewicz 2003).

While more research is needed for all immigrant families, it is particularly scarce on children from lower-incidence immigrant groups whose numbers are smaller, but who frequently make up a significant proportion of the school-age children within particular communities and schools. It is important to examine the experiences of families and children from these groups, because despite potential similarities in immigrant experiences, recent research highlights important differences as well. For example, there is some evidence that children of Latino immigrants may have lower early education participation rates than children of U.S.-born parents. However, the opposite may be true for African, European, Middle Eastern, and Southwest Asian immigrants (Matthews and Jang 2007), though little research has examined whether these patterns differ for different subgroups and those living in different communities across the United States.

Matthews and Jang further suggest that awareness about prekindergarten programs may be affected by such factors as the time spent in the United States, experiences with prekindergarten and child care in the country of origin, the reasons for moving to the United States, parent's education and language ability, and the availability of services and providers in the native language (Matthews and Jang 2007). These and other findings demonstrating the variety of immigrant experiences confirm the need for research on the unique experiences of diverse immigrant populations in Illinois in order to accurately understand access to *Preschool for All* and what would be required to make it truly accessible for all.

## Why Focus on Pakistani and Nigerian Families?

Many immigrant groups make up the Chicago immigrant community. Our first challenge was to choose two of all of these groups to examine. Our selection involved a combination of the following criteria:

- *Prevalence:* We identified the immigrant groups (other than Latino families) that had a sizeable presence in the Chicago area. (We did not just focus on the largest groups, as it is useful to know about the experiences of both larger and smaller groups.)
- *Regional and racial diversity:* We chose groups from different racial background and regions of the world, to minimize commonalities based on culture, history, and potential experience of U.S. discrimination.
- *Identification by local experts as of interest:* We spoke with various individuals involved in the early childhood community in Illinois and Chicago to gather their input on which groups would be of particular interest.

- *Identification of a local trusted organization to be our partner:* Finally, it was absolutely essential that we be able to identify a local organization that was trusted by a particular immigrant group and that could work with us to recruit families. We did require, however, that the organization not be involved with providing early childhood services, as we did not want to bias the sample of parents that participated in our groups.

Even after taking the first four criteria into consideration, a significant number of groups met them. As a result, the final criteria played a major role in determining the final two groups that were selected to be part of this study. Appendix 1 provides more background information on these two populations and their incidence in Chicago and the surrounding areas.

## Study Methodology

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While a more in-depth study methodology is laid out in appendix 2, a brief summary is provided here. The first data collection element of the study involved conducting two focus groups with parents of each group of immigrants in October 2008. The plan was to include one group from each community that consisted of parents with preschool-age children who were currently enrolled in PFA and a second group of parents whose preschoolers were not attending a PFA program. However, because of parents' confusion about their participation status, the groups did not divide neatly into "PFA" and "non-PFA" families as originally intended; nevertheless, they provided rich information about potential barriers to participation. These focus groups were followed a month later by one-on-one and small-group interviews with PFA providers, designed to capture their perspectives on the overall barriers as well as to follow-up with providers about the issues raised by parents.

To recruit families, we partnered with two community organizations. We intentionally identified organizations that did not offer early childhood programs, but that served or had regular contact with Nigerian or Pakistani families with preschool-age children. Recruiters filled a vital role for the project as resources trusted by families and as the first introduction families had to the study. Although the topic of the study was not especially sensitive, we knew that we were recruiting families with unique vulnerabilities including poverty and immigrant status. It is important to note that even though steps were taken to increase parents' comfort, and parents from all four focus groups reported appreciating the opportunity to share their opinions and talk with other parents, some topics remained difficult to discuss given the single encounter and lack of time to build trust.

PFA providers were identified and recruited in a different manner than parents. We identified PFA programs within a two-mile radius of the local recruiting organization, given that both recruiters indicated that the parents they work with were generally within walking distance or a short bus or train ride of the organizations. From those lists we selected three schools and five community-based organizations. The decision was based largely on their proximity to the recruiting organization and the school or center's familiarity to recruiters (e.g., programs they may have heard families mention). Note, however, that some community-based

organizations have multiple PFA sites on Chicago's North Side, and some providers we interviewed were part of the same organization or organizations.

This has implications for the findings and the conclusions we draw. In particular, these findings should be seen as exploratory rather than conclusive, and they should not be assumed to reflect the experiences of even all families from these immigrant groups in this community, much less in the rest of Chicago or the rest of the state. Instead, they reflect insights gathered from a relatively small number of families and providers from just two of the many lower-incidence immigrant groups in one small area in Chicago. Nonetheless, the experiences of the families and providers in this study provide many interesting insights to consider in developing general policy for the PFA program and provide useful avenues for further exploration as policymakers consider how to strengthen the program so it serves all children.



## Findings

The information gathered from the parent focus groups and interviews with school and community-based PFA providers is organized topically into the following sections:

- Characteristics of study respondents
- Form of care used
- Knowledge about PFA
- Perspectives on the value of early care and education
- Adequacy of the PFA supply
- Transportation issues
- Ease of enrollment
- Perspectives on responsiveness/cultural relevance of programs
- Costs to families
- Convenience of schedules
- Fears of contacting public agencies

### Characteristics of Study Respondents

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To understand the implications of these findings, it is first useful to put this study into a larger context by describing the characteristics of our study respondents and comparing them with what is known about these and other immigrant groups in Chicago and in Illinois.

We held two focus groups with each immigrant group, and we talked with 36 families in total. Each focus group with families from Pakistan (parents who had a child enrolled in a preschool program and parents who did not) had 12 participants, while the participating Nigerian focus group had 8 participants and the nonparticipating Nigerian focus group had 4 participants. The characteristics of the families are described below and in table 1.

- *Demographic characteristics:* Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of our participants. As shown there, the vast majority of the participants were women; one man

participated in each immigrant group. All respondents in the Pakistani group, and 9 of the 12 Nigerian respondents, reported being married. The Pakistani focus groups included 5 grandmothers (ranging in age from 55 to 68), with the rest of the Pakistani groups comprising mothers age 23–40, with an average age of almost 34. The age range for the Nigerian families was 26–47, with an average age of 37. Most families had only one preschool-age child, though on average the Pakistani families were slightly larger than the Nigerian families.

- *Geographic location:* The focus groups were held in two neighborhoods on Chicago’s North Side. This part of the city is home to most Pakistani and Nigerian families in the Chicago metropolitan area (see appendix 1). One important implication of this issue is that these findings reflect the experiences of immigrant families in an area where there is a critical mass of other immigrant families from the same home country, as well as in a densely occupied, urban area. As a result, the findings may not be comparable for immigrant families who live more isolated from other immigrants sharing their country of origin, or who live in less densely occupied areas.
- *Supply of PFA programs:* The community where these families lived was also unusual in that there were a fair number of PFA-funded programs in the surrounding neighborhoods. This is seen clearly from the Illinois Early Childhood Asset Map (IECAM), an interactive web-based resource developed by educators, advocates, and private foundations in the state. The IECAM maps the location of all early childhood education programs in the state, and indicates that the North Side of Chicago is one of the more densely program-rich areas in the state (<http://iecam.crc.uiuc.edu/prekall.html>).
- *Language:* Generally, the families we talked with differed in how well they spoke English. The Pakistani focus groups required an interpreter, while the Nigerian focus group did not. This appears to reflect some differences across the two groups, with some studies suggesting that Nigerians are likely to speak English (Cogan and Ibe 2005), and that significant numbers of Pakistani families in Chicago and nationwide are more likely to speak either Urdu or Punjabi at home and to have a subgroup who are limited in their English proficiency (Batalova and Ferruccio 2008; Mehrotra 2005).

**Table 1. Key Characteristics of Focus Group Respondents**

		Pakistani		Nigerian	
		N	% of total	N	% of total
Gender	Male	1	4	1	8
	Female	23	96	11	92
Employed	Yes	7	29	11	92
	No	17	71	1	8
Worked 35+ hours	Yes	1	14	5	45
	No	6	86	6	55
Married	Yes	24	100	9	75
	No	0	0	3	25
Parent/Grandparent	Parent	19	79	12	100
	Grandparent	5	21	0	0

		Pakistani			Nigerian		
		Min.	Max	Mean	Min.	Max.	Mean
Respondent age		23	68	39.8	26	47	37
Number of preschool-age children		1	3	1.26	1	2	1.1
Total number of children		1	5	2.56	1	4	2
Hours worked if employed		4	38	19.1	8	40a	31.7
Number of respondents		24			12		

<sup>a</sup> One respondent recorded working 80 hours a week, however it is likely that she reported her biweekly hours instead. The next highest number of hours reported was 40.

- *Work status:* One of the most important differences between the two groups of respondents—mostly mothers and a few grandmothers—was in their work status, which, in turn, had important implications for the kinds of programs they needed for their children.
- All but one of the Nigerian respondents, regardless of the focus group, were working, with 45 percent working more than 35 hours a week. While general data on the work status of Nigerians in Chicago are not readily available, local experts we interviewed reported that work is very common among Nigerian women, although often the jobs are service jobs (such as cleaning, housekeeping, hotel cleaning, etc.) that were not well paid or steady.<sup>12</sup>
- In contrast, many Pakistani respondents in both focus groups were not working. Only 29 percent of the Pakistani participants worked, and of those who worked, only one of them (14 percent of all of those who were working) worked more than 35 hours a week. This is only partially explained by the involvement of grandparents in the focus groups; even when just looking at the Pakistani mothers who participated, only 32 percent were working and 68 percent were not working. Only one of the five Pakistani grandmothers was working, though she worked relatively few hours each week. Many Pakistani

respondents who were not working reported that they would like to be working and to use care full time, but they were not able to get jobs and therefore were not able to receive subsidies.

- Again, while we do not have systematic information on these issues, several providers we interviewed suggested that many Pakistani women in the Chicago area do not work outside the home. While the reasons given for this varied, they included language barriers, transportation barriers, the number of children they had at home, their cultural expectations about women in the home, the cost of child care, and fear about their immigration status. However, we were unable to corroborate these impressions from any formal data source.
- *Religion:* While we did not ask families about their religious beliefs, many of our Pakistani respondents brought up their Muslim identity as relevant to the conversation. This is corroborated by other sources that suggest that Pakistani families in Chicago are likely to be Muslim (Mehrotra 2005). Further, one researcher suggests that the local Muslim religious leaders in the neighborhood mosques (the same neighborhood where the focus groups were held) are likely to emphasize close adherence to Muslim traditions.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Nigerian respondents did not proactively identify any particular religion as relevant to the focus group discussion, or as affecting their experiences or decisions about preschool. The Nigerian community in Chicago is religiously diverse; some families are Muslim, and others are Roman Catholic and of various Protestant denominations (Cogan and Ibe 2005).
- *Immigrant status:* Given the sensitivity and personal nature of the information, we did not ask families directly about their immigration status and whether they had legal documents permitting them to be in the United States. However, we were told by recruiters that the families were a mix of those with and without legal residency documents.

Finally, we also asked the parents whether they would be willing to tell us how long they had been in the country. While many parents answered, we were told clearly by the recruiters that parents may not necessarily tell us the truth given that they did not know us well, so we did not include these data.

In addition to the above characteristics, which provide context for the respondents in our study, some additional information about the Pakistani and Nigerian immigrant communities also provides useful context for this study:

- *Migration history:* The Pakistani and Nigerian influx into Chicago both began in the mid-1960s and early 1970s (Cogan and Ibe 2005; Mehrotra 2005), which means that there has been a community of immigrants from these countries for some time. However, as mentioned above, we were unable to collect reliable data on how long our respondents had been in the country.

- *Socioeconomic factors:* While information is not available for Chicago in particular, research suggests that both Pakistani and Nigerian immigrants are more likely to be relatively highly educated and professional than some other immigrant groups. This is somewhat truer for Pakistani immigrants.
- While Pakistani-origin immigrants on the whole are more educated than other immigrant groups, educational attainment varies broadly across Pakistani-origin immigrants. In 2006, 56 percent of the more than 200,000 Pakistani immigrants age 25 and older had bachelor's degrees or higher, compared with about 27 percent of all foreign-born adults (Batalova and Ferruccio 2008). However, 13 percent of Pakistani immigrant adults did not have high school diplomas or GEDs, compared with 32 percent of all foreign-born adults. Pakistani immigrant men are more likely to participate in the U.S. civilian labor force than foreign-born men overall (Batalova and Ferruccio 2008). Around a third of Pakistani immigrant men hold jobs in highly skilled fields like management, business, and science and engineering.
- A large number of highly educated Nigerians seeks immigration to the United States every year (Ogbaa 2003). Census data show that about 75 percent of all foreign-born blacks over age 25 (a population of which Nigerian immigrants make up the majority) have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 16 percent of native-born African Americans.<sup>14</sup>
- *Early childhood education in the country of origin:* Finally, one issue that may affect parental attitudes and preferences toward early childhood education is whether such programs are part of their experience or expectations in their home country. Interestingly, the early childhood context is quite different in Pakistan and Nigeria, though we do not know what the families in our study might have experienced before arriving in the United States.
- In Pakistan, compulsory schooling begins at age 5; however, early childhood education (*katchi*) for children age 3–5 helps prepare children for formal schooling. The pre-primary gross enrollment rate was 46.5 percent in 2004 (UNESCO 2006). These pre-primary programs exist in diverse settings (formal and informal, public and private). Many government primary schools run *katchi* classes for the younger children, charging a minimal admission fee though generally not tuition (Hunzai 2007, 302). Typically, the *katchi* school day runs from 8.00 a.m. to 12.30 p.m., and 50 or more children will attend, depending on demand in the local area (Hunzai 2007, 303).
- In Nigeria, compulsory schooling begins at age 6, though pre-primary programs for children age 3–5 also exist. Only about 15 percent of the children in this age range are enrolled in pre-primary programs (UNESCO 2006).

## Form of Care Used

One important characteristic of the PFA program is that funds go to a range of early childhood settings, including schools, child care centers, and family child care centers. Interestingly, a key implication of the different work status across the two immigrant groups is that the groups differed significantly in the type and amount of care they used:

- Given that our Nigerian respondents were almost all working, they could only access PFA services if they had their child enrolled in a full-time community child care program that served children for the full working day and full year. As a result, nearly all the Nigerian parents from the focus group participating in PFA had their children enrolled in community-based child care programs, though one used home-based child care because the center-based care did not have the hours she needed to allow her to work. Because the families were low income, the only way they could pay for this care was to get state child care subsidies to defray some of or all the cost of care, which many of them did. The nonparticipating families were also using child care to work, although a small number were using care by family, friends, and neighbors. Subsidies and program costs were discussed by nearly all families using child care, regardless of whether the program offered PFA.
- In contrast, several Pakistani parents we spoke with were not working, could not afford child care, and thus had enrolled their children in local school-based part-time programs. Some parents further remarked that since their children were in programs for only part of the day, it was difficult to find work. One parent said “I’d like pre-K to be full time so I can support my family by working,” and another parent told us that she couldn’t work because of the “hour restrictions” caused by the short PFA schedule in the schools. Parents also described how they couldn’t get subsidies to pay for full-time care because they didn’t work.

This basic difference has repercussions for many of the findings discussed below, as the respondents’ perceptions and experiences were effectively of two very different program models and approaches.

We also talked to the providers in the study to find out how closely their clientele reflected the differences seen in our focus groups—specifically, whether community-based organizations were more likely to serve Nigerian families and schools more likely to serve Pakistani families. We found that this pattern was true for Nigerian families, but only somewhat true for Pakistani families. For example, none of the three schools had Nigerian children this year. One school had African children, but mostly from Sudan and Ghana. In contrast, only one of the five child care centers did not have any Nigerian children enrolled at the time of our visit—all of which corroborates the reports from the parents. However, information from the providers suggests that our focus group of Pakistani families was not as reflective of the provider experiences, as all the centers we interviewed currently or had recently served Pakistani children. However, the proportions were small (1 percent, 3 percent, and 5 percent), with one program offering part-day services reaching 30 percent.

## Knowledge about PFA

Another important issue to examine is whether immigrant parents know about the PFA initiative. We found significant variation in program knowledge across the families with whom we spoke. Some families—particularly the nonparticipating families in both immigrant groups—were entirely unfamiliar with PFA. This suggests, at the most basic level, that additional outreach to immigrant families about the program would be helpful in improving participation.

However, among the participating families, we were surprised to find parents that did not realize their children were enrolled in PFA. In particular, a number of the Nigerian parents did not realize that their children were enrolled in PFA or in a publicly offered prekindergarten program within community-based child care programs. In contrast, the Pakistani families whose children were enrolled in school-based PFA programs were more aware that their children were in a publicly offered prekindergarten program, though they may not have been aware that it was PFA. Further, most Pakistani parents whose children were not enrolled in PFA were aware that prekindergarten programs were offered in the public schools in their neighborhoods, even if they were not familiar with the name “Preschool for All.”

This finding led us to pursue this question further in our follow-up visits with PFA community-based providers. We found that in many ways it makes sense that parents in community-based settings (in contrast to schools) may not know they are enrolled in PFA for the following reasons:

- First, community-based providers were generally serving a broader age range of children than just those in PFA. The children’s care in these settings was often paid for by funds from parent fees, the subsidy system, Head Start, and PFA. For these providers, PFA supplemented their core funding, allowing them to enhance the quality of their services for the children—meaning it was not a “program” as much as a funding stream to enhance quality. The primary service they provided was child care and Head Start, and, as a result, they did not seem to see the service they provided to these families as “Preschool for All.” In fact, one provider respondent from a community-based program was unaware that his or her program participated in PFA until he or she checked with other staff.
- In a related point, the community-based providers we spoke to did not market the fact that they provided PFA; they did not have fliers or handouts or materials on the program at all, much less in different languages. This may be partially explained by the fact that many families appear to enroll their children in these programs at younger ages, so parents are not asking about services available to 3- and 4-year olds, and they are not enrolling in a particular service as much as enrolling in the local child care program. However, this does not completely explain the issue, as providers did have fliers marketing their Head Start program, which in some ways is similar as it focuses on a similar age group. We were unable to ascertain why the providers we spoke to did not



have such fliers and other PFA materials to give to parents—for example, if they did not have any, or did not feel that the materials adequately reflected their program or were relevant for their families. This area is worth further investigation to see if this is also true for other providers.

- Finally, as is described more below, parents follow an enrollment process and submit paperwork for the local child care program, as well as for the subsidy funds and for Head Start. As a result, they are likely aware of being part of those programs, while their involvement in PFA may be less apparent. We do not know whether providers asked parents to fill out a separate PFA form, or whether the information on that form was already collected on the other forms so they did not ask parents to provide it again. This issue is also worth further investigation.

The situation differed in the school-based programs, where PFA funding was the primary source of the resources for the part-day program that was offered. In the schools, therefore, the program that parents enrolled their children in was more closely identified as a prekindergarten educational program, although the terms parents and staff used may have differed. One school-based respondent reported that “parents and teachers have different names for the program: ‘preschool for all,’ ‘kinder’ and ‘pre-K.’ ” This could help explain why the Pakistani respondents were more familiar with the idea of public prekindergarten, even if not with the name “Preschool for All.”

In addition, there was little evidence that school-based providers “marketed” the program. One school-based program a provider explained “[We] do no marketing, although Mayor Daley spoke of PFA openly when it first emerged.” Instead, the school providers reported that parents primarily heard about the prekindergarten program by word of mouth. The research team saw only one poster about the program in one school-based program, though the site visit occurred three months into the school year so other posters may have been taken down since school programs were no longer enrolling children. Even in that school, the individual interviewed did not mention any marketing efforts, and instead echoed that most parents heard about the program through word of mouth. Finally, the school personnel we talked with also said that they did little active outreach about the program, since they had waiting lists and were not able to serve all the families that wanted to attend.

Finally, how families look for and find out about their care options may also differ depending upon whether they are working and therefore need full-time care. The Nigerian respondents who used community-based programs found their programs by walking around the neighborhood; seeing them on their way to work; talking to friends, family, neighbors, or coworkers; or hearing about them on TV or radio. Most of the Pakistani families seemed to know about the school-based programs they used either because they were their neighborhood schools, or they had heard about them through word of mouth.

In summary, expanding outreach about the PFA initiative to these immigrant communities, particularly in different languages, would help build knowledge about the program. Similarly,



reaching out to parents receiving subsidies would also be a useful strategy. However, to reach the goal of access for all, more may need to be done to help community-based programs identify what and how to best market their use of PFA resources, and the quality enhancements PFA allows them to provide.

## Perspectives on the Value of Early Care and Education

One question facing many policymakers is whether immigrant families *want* to have their preschool-age children enrolled in group educational settings. The issue obviously has important implications for outreach, as it affects whether the first task is to convince parents of the value of early education, or whether policymakers can instead focus on other access barriers. Understanding this question is particularly important given that earlier research mistakenly attributed the choice of immigrant parents to use care by family members to a preference for such care; while this finding is true in some cases, more recent research suggests that this choice often reflects the options available to families rather than a preference for nongroup care (Calderon 2007; Hernandez and Puente 2009; Shields 2007).

Interestingly, when asked about their perspective on early care and education, most parents in the focus groups—both Nigerian and Pakistani, whether or not they were enrolled in a program—were supportive and clearly interested in having their child enrolled in some kind of early education program in a group setting. The families seemed to value the educational aspects of early care and education, as evident in these comments:

*"We have to keep our children updated. Education [is a] must." (Pakistani parent, PFA focus group)*

*"I want them to go to day care so they can understand when they get to [elementary] school." (Pakistani parent, PFA focus group)*

*"When kids are home they watch TV. When they go to preschool, they actually learn." (Pakistani parent, non-PFA focus group)*

*"Children do not learn at home; at school its better education-wise." (Pakistani parent, non-PFA focus group)*

*"[Day care] is a solid foundation for education. I can't do it alone." (Nigerian parent, PFA focus group)*

*"[I send my daughter to day care] for my daughter to mix with people; to learn to express herself. She talks very well now, but before she didn't. It was hard for her to get her words out...Just in a few months... she's already changed. Now she talks fast." (Nigerian parent, PFA focus group)*

*“[Day care is] good for kids... when he talks he’s very smart. Kids in home care don’t know a lot of things. Day care has a lot of advantages.” (Nigerian parent, non-PFA focus group)*

Interestingly, even the Pakistani parents whose children were not enrolled in the PFA program were positive about early education, including those who weren’t using any form of care and were staying at home with their children. However, we did not talk with any Nigerian parents who had chosen to stay at home with their children—a group that may have had different impressions of the value of early education (though this was not the case for Pakistani parents).

At least for these two very different groups of parents, there is little need to convince them of the importance of early education as part of any outreach strategy.

## Adequacy of the PFA Supply

Another important question when examining access is whether parents in particular communities are able to easily find a PFA program where they can enroll their child. This is obviously related to larger issues of overall funding levels—as the program is still not fully funded to serve all eligible children—as well as how funds are allocated both within Chicago and across the state. While central, these issues were beyond the scope of this particular project.

Interestingly, identifying whether respondents thought the supply was adequate was complicated by the variations in the type of care families used, particularly depending on whether they are seeking a part-day or full-working-day option. Looking first at the Nigerian families participating in the focus group, whether there was a sufficient supply of PFA programs was not relevant. Many of these families had not actively sought out a PFA program; in fact, many did not know they were in one. Instead, they were looking for community-based child care programs, and (if they were enrolled in child care centers) were enrolled in PFA because it was available in the program. Or they were enrolled in community-based child care that didn’t have PFA, or other child care settings (such as family, friend, or neighbor [FFN] care) that did not have PFA. As a result, their perspective on whether the supply was adequate was on whether they could get the *child care program* they wanted, whether they could afford it, and whether they could get subsidies; it was unclear whether they actually saw PFA as something they applied for or were seeking. So when asked about program availability, their comments seemed to be more about child care programs and the affordability of care, or subsidies, rather than about PFA. Also, their search for a slot in a program was not necessarily recent; it seems likely that many families had enrolled in these programs before their child was 3 or 4, so the search process could have occurred longer ago.

It is interesting to juxtapose these findings with the fact that all the PFA-participating community-based child care centers that we visited had vacancies and could have enrolled more children to meet their PFA class size quota. Some of the reasons they reported to account for the under-enrollment included competition from other centers, having interim directors, and

the costs of child care for parents who didn't qualify for subsidies. Also, as noted earlier, none of the child care center-based PFA programs marketed their connection to the PFA. Again, their primary focus was to serve families needing child care and Head Start. Whether marketing their involvement with the initiative would help expand their enrollment is an interesting question, though not a straightforward one given the timing of the enrollment and the fact that low-income parents must qualify for Head Start or subsidies to be able to attend community-based child care settings full time.

The situation was markedly different for the Pakistani families we spoke with, who were mostly enrolled in school-based programs. They were much more likely to talk about wanting to enroll in a particular school where space was lacking. Approximately half the parents in the PFA group said they initially had been put on waiting lists.<sup>15</sup> Parents said they waited anywhere from two to four months, although one parent said she never received a call from the school she wanted initially. Now her child attends a different school. Their experiences were corroborated by the school-based providers with whom we spoke, all of whom had waiting lists and were not able to serve all the families interested in enrolling their children. One Pakistani parent from the PFA group gave her perspective on the reason for the waiting lists. She described what she was told by school officials: "part of the space issue is that there aren't enough teachers... they don't have enough funds to hire more teachers, so space is limited depending on the number of teachers." The school providers we spoke to did not explicitly mention space or teachers as the reason for waiting lists, but a few described instituting additional classroom shifts (e.g., a morning, afternoon, and late afternoon or third-shift classroom) to try to respond to high demand.

## Transportation Issues

Another common access barrier can be whether families have difficulty transporting their children to the program. Interestingly, this was another area that our two groups appeared to experience differently. Transportation challenges did not come up for the Nigerians, who talked about driving, taking public transportation, or walking to their programs. This was corroborated by the community-based providers serving them, who said most of their parents either walked or drove their children to the program.

In contrast, the Pakistani families were much more likely to talk about having difficulty finding ways to get their children to the programs. "Transportation is not easy" one parent in the PFA group explained. In part, the difficulty may stem from the fact that many Pakistani respondents did not appear to have cars or to drive. "I don't have a car so transportation's important" one Pakistani mother from the non-PFA group explained. This was echoed by most parents in this group. Research also suggests that immigrant families may find it difficult to access information about public transportation given language barriers (U.S. Government Accountability Office 2005).

As a result, several Pakistani parents worked together to hire someone to carpool their children. Several school- and community-based providers also noted that this was a common

practice among Pakistani parents. For example, one community based administrator commented that “many Pakistanis have organized a transportation service where vans bring about eight kids at once. One of the parents has turned it into a business.” And a teacher in a school-based program noted, “They organize vans to take children to school... Two or three women will pile Pakistani children into their vans.” At least one provider respondent was concerned about the safety of this approach, although other respondents we spoke to focused on the ingenuity of the system and less on its safety implications.

However, while an effective strategy to address their transportation problem, it was a costly one. For example, the parents participating in carpools had to pay for each child separately, which was costly since they not only used the transportation for going back and forth from school, but also to take them to religious events. They reported that transportation could cost \$70–\$100 a month, and one mother mentioned that the fees had been raised because of gas prices.

When we mapped the school-based and the community-based programs, we found the school-based programs were more geographically dispersed, which makes sense given school boundaries. For the Pakistani families who used school-based settings, the dispersal of school programs seems likely to mean that parents must often drive or carpool to take the children to school, particularly if they cannot get into their local school’s program. The Nigerian participants, on the other hand, were more likely to use community-based programs. While we could not determine this from this particular study, previous research has shown that physical location and convenience is one factor parent’s use in choosing child care—so it is possible that the community-based programs were more convenient to their homes or work, thus making transportation easier.

## Ease of Enrollment

The ease of the enrollment process is another common issue affecting program participation. Enrollment issues can challenge immigrant families in several ways: first, in their overall complexity, which is an issue that affects all families; second, in whether the paperwork requests sensitive information such as Social Security numbers or other data that may be problematic for immigrant families; and third, whether parents face language barriers in filling out the paperwork or enrolling in the program.<sup>16</sup>

As context, it is useful to understand what the PFA guidelines suggest that families need to do to enroll in the program. To start the process, families must go to their local program and fill out a brief application form that asks for information including name, address, number of people in the family, and the languages their child understands. Once a space becomes available, a teacher or program administrator will call the family and ask them to bring additional paperwork, including a birth certificate, immunization records, proof of residence, and income. Programs would also conduct a screening to determine the child’s eligibility and need for services.

This is another area where the Pakistani and Nigerian respondents raised very different issues because of the types of programs they were using and their English proficiency.

- *Logistical complexity:* Generally, the Pakistani families did not seem to be intimidated by the amount of information required or the process for enrollment. However, when asked about the enrollment process, the Nigerian parents did not discuss PFA enrollment but instead related their concerns about the child care *subsidy* enrollment process, and to some extent the enrollment requirements of local child care programs. For example, they were knowledgeable about what was required for initial enrollment for child care subsidies, and some were explicit about the challenges created by the paperwork, including the time involved, and the recertification process. One parent noted, “Enrollment is not easy.” Another parent noted “For the second form (i.e., part of the enrollment process after the initial application) I stayed 2–3 hours. If you make a mistake, there’s no correction because they’re putting it into the computer. You do not take it home because it’s a lot of forms.” Yet, Nigerian families appeared to have relatively little sense of the specific PFA enrollment process, which is not surprising given that all the paperwork for the different funding sources appear to be filled out at once, which was also confirmed by several providers.

These different parent perspectives were corroborated by our interviews with providers. Overall, respondents from the two schools included in the study estimated that the paperwork took 30–45 minutes<sup>17</sup> to fill out for school-based programs, while some respondents for the community-based child care programs estimated two hours (though this paperwork is likely to include the forms required for enrolling for child care subsidies or Head Start).

- *Sensitive information:* The question of whether immigrant families are required or requested to provide sensitive information (for example, a Social Security number) is an important one (Matthews and Jang 2007). Though it is possible that they were not comfortable talking about these issues with the research team, our parent respondents did not report being particularly concerned about the information that families had to provide, though some parents said that it could be a problem for families who did not have legal documents or had language challenges. This may be because it was not an issue for many of them, or because some did not want to discuss concerns that could imply that they were in the United States without legal documentation. It is important to note, too, that official PFA policy does not require or request a SSN from either the parent or the child.

While parents did not bring this up, when we asked PFA providers, we also found variation both across and within provider types in whether they requested families to provide SSNs as part of the enrollment process. For example, the community-based child care programs we interviewed asked parents to provide their SSNs when enrolling in their program. When asked about it, some respondents said if the parent didn’t have one, they could do without it, but it was strongly encouraged. (While we did not ask, it appears that child care providers collected SSNs in order to be able to access employer and income information for subsidy eligibility.) However, in accordance with the Federal Privacy Act, applicants for

child care subsidies are not required to give SSNs.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, many schools did not report requiring a SSN; this corresponds with official policy. One exception, however, was one respondent at a school who reported that they requested SSN because the Chicago Public Schools coordinator requests that they do so (though we have no evidence of this one way or the other, and do not know whether this is a request specific to that particular school). This respondent, however, also reported that parents could mark off that they don't have a SSN if they choose.

- *Language barriers:* The main challenge voiced by the Pakistani respondents about enrolling in the program was that they had trouble with the language, and almost all of them had to use the local community agency (run by the recruiter of these focus groups) to help them fill out the forms. At least for Pakistani families, this finding appears to corroborate other research that highlights the importance of translating forms and using trusted intermediary immigrant-serving organizations (Matthews and Jang 2007). We did not hear about this issue from the Nigerian respondents, though this is not surprising given that they all spoke English.

When we followed up on this issue with providers, several of them felt that there were parents who had difficulty enrolling because of language barriers. While we had heard about this issue from the Pakistani families (which is not surprising given that that group needed a translator), it was interesting that a number of the center-based providers highlighted this problem for the Nigerian families as well. This suggests that the English proficiency of our group of Nigerian respondents may not have been representative of Nigerians generally.

## Perspectives on Responsiveness/Cultural Relevance of Programs

A primary concern for many early care and education experts is whether programs reflect and respond to the cultural and ethnic/racial heritage of the families they serve. Being responsive is important for many reasons, but it is critical in supporting parent participation as it can make parents feel more welcome, allow them to communicate with the teachers to understand what is happening and to support their child's learning at home, and develop trust for the program. Programs can be responsive in many ways, from hiring teachers and staff who speak the languages of the parents and/or who are from the same country, to creating formal roles for parents and others to act as cultural liaisons, to honoring and respecting cultural and religious practices that may differ from the mainstream American society (Matthews and Jang 2007).

### What Parents Told Us

In examining what parents told us about these issues, it is very important to remember that we may have only heard part of the story, given issues of trust. However, when asked about whether these issues presented challenges or concerns for them, respondents in both immigrant groups responded that they did not expect or require the programs to totally reflect their



cultural needs or makeup, though they did value programs that were culturally responsive and sensitive.

- *Some parents did not expect programs to reflect their culture:* Several parents commented about the value they placed on diversity. One Nigerian parent said, “It’s not a barrier for me if you don’t have someone from your culture. This is America!”—making the latter comment as if to say, “Why expect that?” Another parent added that she loves the cultural and ethnic diversity in this country, so she wouldn’t want it to “just be all Nigerian.”
- *Some parents valued education more than their concerns about cultural responsiveness:* When asked if parents would still send their children to the prekindergarten program if there were no staff from their culture, the Pakistani parents whose children were enrolled in a prekindergarten program all said they would. One explained, “We have to keep our children updated. Education [is a] must.” Some parents also talked about wanting their children to learn or improve their English and increase language and communication skills. Some parents, particularly in the Nigerian focus groups, were concerned that their own accented English limited their prospects for advancement. They generally did not seem to see these programs as places where their children were supposed to focus on maintaining their culture or language.
- Some respondents felt that improving the cultural and language responsiveness of programs through the staff would improve participation: Some of the parents discussed how having staff from their country would be appealing and attract more families. For example, when asked whether having Nigerian staff would appeal to families, one parent responded “If it [African staff] was offered, we’d flock to the program.” One Nigerian parent said, “They need to employ African teachers.” She further explained that if there were an African woman in her day care, she could talk to her and feel understood; “For example I can go to that woman to talk.” The recruiters also reported that not having staff who spoke the languages of the groups they served was a barrier for families to participate.

The juxtaposition of these different perspectives suggests that respondents had different ways that they weighed the relative benefits of having their children participate with the cost of not having culturally responsive programs. It also seems possible that at least some respondents felt that lack of representation was a larger disincentive than they indicated to the research staff. This possibility was corroborated by our recruiters, who felt that lack of representation was more of a barrier for some families than reported by participants.

Interestingly, the one area where participants talked openly about their concerns with programs not meeting their needs was within the Pakistani focus groups, when respondents discussed whether programs were supportive of their Muslim religious practices. The area of greatest concern was around food—specifically Halal dietary requirements—as some parents discussed how their children would go hungry because they didn’t know what of the school food met their religious requirements, and that in some cases the teachers would not let the children have snacks if they also brought their lunches. One Pakistani parent whose child was

enrolled in prekindergarten expressed the concerns of many in the group when she said “There are so many issues and so many things that are different about our culture and the American culture. We know that and it’s fine. And we can compromise a lot. But we can’t compromise on this.”

Parents also voiced concerns about not excusing absences for Muslim religious holidays (i.e., children wanted to have perfect attendance, but couldn’t accomplish this if they missed school on their religious holidays, which created conflict at home), and not being able to pray at school. Some respondents talked about how some Pakistani parents sought out private schools to address their concerns, though it is not clear whether this was for preschool-age children.

### What Providers Told Us

These responses led us to talk with the providers about how well they were able to respond to the cultural, language, and religious needs of their families. Looking first at the diversity of staff, it appeared that a number of providers had some staff from Nigeria and/or Pakistan, or had staff who were able to speak at least some of the languages.

- All the school-based programs had at least one person on their staff who spoke Urdu. However, none had lead teachers who spoke Urdu, and only a few had aides. None of the schools reported having any staff members from Nigeria.
- A subset of the community-based programs has Urdu speakers on staff, and a few had Nigerian teachers.

Because of the parents’ concerns, we also talked with providers about how they were able to accommodate religious concerns of families, particularly Muslim families. Looking first at accommodating food-related concerns, both school and center-based programs described various ways that they were sensitive around dietary requirements. On the issue of Halal, a subset of the community-based settings reported that the programs had a caterer that served vegetarian options, and one specifically mentioned Halal. One provider noted that his/her program provided Halal, and that about half the Nigerian families the program served were Muslim. The issue played out differently for the schools. Three schools we spoke to said that they offered snacks but did not provide meals in PFA, though some of them used to. None of the schools reported food issues as a major concern for their families—which is interesting given how prevalent the concern was in the Pakistani focus group, most of whose children were enrolled in school-based programs.<sup>19</sup>

### Cost to Families

The PFA program is designed to be a free program, to ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation for any family. However, how the issue of cost played out differed across the two groups of parents we spoke with. The Nigerian families did not expect their programs to be



free, as their children were enrolled in community-based programs that operated full-day, full-year programs and levied fees. On the other hand, the Pakistani parents had enrolled their children in public schools, which were supposed to be free. In the Pakistani parents' minds, these school-based programs were not free because parents had to buy supplies and pay for private transportation. As one parent explained, she was given a list of school supplies that she needed to buy once her child was enrolled. The supplies included items such as composition books, "wipes," and tissue paper. Several parents concurred that they had similar experiences in their children's schools, and one mother said the total expenses were "too much."

We asked providers about this issue. Again, the answers varied by program type. School-based providers discuss some additional fees associated with participation, though generally these were fairly minimal. They ranged from about \$5–\$10 in one school to closer to \$30 or more in another school, including the costs of a book bag and a uniform. In addition, all three schools were aware of costs Pakistani parents incurred for private driver services. In contrast, most community-based centers said they did not have additional costs associated with participation, though all highlighted the cost of the overall services and what parents paid for that (paying the programs either full fees or the copayment required under the subsidy system). A couple of parents also indicated costs of about \$5 for an occasional field trip—although the trips may be optional.

These issues are complex to address, as in some cases parents may be expected to incur such costs when their children enroll in elementary school. However, as far as these expenses may be seen as problematic to parents with preschool-age children, they may present a barrier to having parents enroll in a voluntary program. As such, it may be worth exploring whether these costs are prevalent across different programs and whether they create barriers to enrollment.

## Convenience of Schedules

The hours a program is in operation affect whether working families can access the services. As noted earlier, school-based programs operated only a few hours a day, such as from 9:00 am to 11:00 am,<sup>20</sup> during the school year. Community-based child care programs operated on a full-working-day, full-year basis.

Interestingly, the parents in both immigrant groups we spoke with were clearly interested in full-day early education services. However, only the Nigerians were able to avail themselves of the community-based full-day settings because they worked and were able to access subsidies. The Pakistani respondents in our focus group were eager to work, talked about needing and wanting full-day care, but were not able to get subsidies because they were not employed. However, even though the Pakistani respondents (mostly mothers) were not employed, many of those who used PFA reported having problems with the short hours of the program. They found it very inconvenient and hard to use. For example, one mother said, "the minimum should be 6 hours, maybe 4 ½. If [it's] more hours, mom can work." Another parent responded that, "it should be more hours so we can run home errands." Most parents seemed to agree that longer hours would be more appealing. While it is not at all clear whether the short hours are a

disincentive for parents to sign up for PFA, the level of their concerns suggests some parents may find the short hours are worth the effort. Further, the Pakistani families that were not enrolled in PFA talked about wanting education for their children, which suggests other reasons behind their failure to enroll that were not articulated. It may be worth exploring whether the short program hours in stand-alone PFA programs create a disincentive for enrollment.

In response to these issues, we asked the school-based providers in particular whether they believed that the part-day schedule of the school PFA programs was a disincentive to participation. They generally felt that it was not, citing the fact that they had waiting lists and full enrollment. However, this is not evidence that the schedule does not deter participation; rather, it proves simply that there are enough families for whom the schedule is not a deterrent to fill the available slots.

## Fears of Contacting Public Agencies

Fear of public agencies, in particular unauthorized immigrants' fear of deportation, is commonly cited as a reason some immigrant families do not participate in public programs. The sensitivity of this issue makes its prevalence difficult to ascertain. Not surprisingly, we received very different information depending on who we asked about this issue. Parents in the focus groups may have been concerned about speaking openly about this issue, so the discussion of their comments below should be interpreted cautiously.

First, we asked the immigrant respondents whether they thought there were families that would not want to participate in these programs due to distrust of public agencies. Overall—though there are some exceptions—our respondents did not report this area as of major concern, even when the question was phrased as being about *other* parents. Respondents seemed to see schools and early childhood programs as safe places and did not feel that parents were too frightened to avail themselves of these services. It is important to recognize, however, that the parents who were comfortable enough to attend a focus group were unlikely to be fearful of contact with authorities.

The Nigerian parents in one focus group did, however, candidly discuss potential fear of government agencies, although they added that most parents understood that their children—especially older children—had a right to attend school. One mother gave a good picture of the complexity of the issue when she told us, “There are a lot of undocumented people, and they know their kids can go to school. Their older kids are in school. The documented are not scared. The undocumented are scared because they fear being deported.” A second respondent said it a different way when she noted, “A lot of families are reluctant to enroll because they do not trust government.” Another Nigerian respondent added that there is definitely some reluctance to participate in subsidy-based programs in particular. “If you enroll in [the subsidy program],” she told us, “they have all your information in the system.”

In contrast to comments made by these Nigerian parents, the Pakistani families reported as a consensus that they generally did not fear preschool participation or other government

programs. One mother did say, however, that she had experienced a difficult situation in a school district in a nearby state (which involved being labeled a terrorist since her daughter wore a headscarf), but she felt safer in Chicago because of its greater cultural diversity.

Similarly, the providers we spoke to did not mention fear of public agencies as a big problem among the families they serve. A few mentioned it might be a disincentive for families they are not serving. Yet providers also acknowledged that there may be fear that providers are not aware of, in particular because they are unlikely to ever be in contact with those parents who are too fearful to approach them.

In contrast, both recruiters we spoke to said fear was a huge problem in their communities and that the families we spoke to did not mention it because they did not know and trust the Urban Institute researchers and typically do not trust Americans with that information.

## Conclusions and Implications

If the findings of this study are true in other parts of Chicago and other parts of the state, it suggests that the PFA program could be changed in several ways to facilitate enrollment among immigrant populations. The findings also underscore the importance of talking with families about their experiences, and of not assuming that the experiences of any particular immigrant group would be the same as the experiences of another.

Some of the larger lessons from this study include these six:

- Immigrant families face barriers to participating in the PFA program. However, even just looking at these two groups, it is clear that immigrant families are clearly not homogeneous, and the differences in their experiences are likely to be driven by other realities of their lives. As a result, ensuring access to immigrant families requires moving away from assumptions that all immigrant families have similar problems, and that their problems can be addressed with universal solutions. This underscores the importance of talking with families in different immigrant groups to help understand their particular experiences.
- Although small, this study corroborates challenges raised by other research on immigrants and services, including language barriers, requirements for enrollment, the importance of cultural sensitivity and responsiveness in programs, and fear of interacting with government agencies. It also supports the suggestions of other research that to address these problems and to build trust, it is particularly important to work with trusted mediators and to create ongoing relationships with intermediary organizations that serve immigrant families.
- *At least for these parents*, there was no need to convince them of the importance of early education for their 3- and 4-year-olds. They wanted their children to be ready for school, and their language about what that meant and why it was important was similar to that used by early childhood educators and professionals. It would be interesting to explore the sources of their beliefs about early education, and whether they might have to do with their own educational level and/or early education experiences in their birth countries. *If* this finding is also true more broadly, it suggests that it may be less important to focus on convincing parents of the importance of preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds than to focus on helping them access what is available.

- This study also identified additional barriers that have been often found in previous research about barriers to access for low-income and vulnerable families. These include lack of knowledge about the service, challenges with inadequate supply (at least of school-based options), transportation barriers, logistical challenges associated with enrollment for community-based child care programs, and subsidies, costs, and schedules. However, many of these issues, while not specific to the immigrant community, are made even more challenging for immigrants given the previously mentioned issues around language, fear, and so forth. Some of these issues may be related to the fact that the initiative was not fully funded.
- The research also highlighted some other barriers that are less often discussed in the literature.
  - Parents who are working and whose children are enrolled in community-based child care PFA programs seem to face different challenges and barriers than those enrolled in school-based programs. Any barriers associated with their ability to access those programs (i.e., cost, child care subsidy eligibility policies, and logistical requirements associated with enrollment or redetermination) are by definition barriers to their ability to access PFA. Any effort to reduce barriers to PFA use for working parents needs to address barriers to subsidy and access to full-time child care.
  - The concerns from some parents about programs not being sufficiently sensitive to their religious practices and beliefs highlights the importance of including religious beliefs in any discussion of helping programs become more culturally sensitive.
- Finally, the differences and similarities across these two groups in this particular part of Chicago raise important questions for further research. How closely do the initial findings on these two groups reflect realities of other Nigerian and Pakistani parents in other parts of Chicago and Illinois? To what extent do they reflect the realities of other immigrant groups in Chicago or the rest of the state? How do factors such as language, race/ethnicity, religious identity, length of time and strength of the community, and level of isolation, play out for different groups? Can adjusting key policy parameters or program strategies make the program more accessible to these groups—either through common immigrant-focused strategies, or through more targeted strategies focused on the needs of particular immigrant groups? Which of these issues are important to the early education policymakers of Illinois, and could result in changes to the PFA initiative or its implementation?

In short, these findings suggest that low-incidence immigrant families can face numerous barriers to access to enrolling their children in the Preschool for All program. While some barriers they face are unique to their immigration status, others are experienced by other low-income and vulnerable families as well. The fact that many of these barriers corroborate findings in other research on immigrant and/or low-income families suggests a sustained effort to address the barriers highlighted in this report would help improve participation for

vulnerable children in general, as well as children of immigrants. As a result, it seems likely that efforts to address the issues raised by these families would indeed help the PFA fulfill its promise of making prekindergarten services available to *all* children.

## APPENDIX A.

# *Incidence of Immigrant Populations in Illinois and Metro Chicago (2000)*

**TABLE A1. Incidence of Pakistani and Nigerian populations in Illinois and Metro Chicago**

Pakistani population in Metro Chicago in 2000: 18,821		Nigerian population in Metro Chicago in 2000: 6,775	
Top Ten Municipalities		Top Ten Municipalities	
1 Chicago	8,740	1 Chicago	11,190
2 Skokie	520	2 Bolingbrook	534
3 Palatine	492	3 Aurora	348
4 Hanover Park	413	4 Oak Park	331
5 Glendale Heights	349	5 Evanston	327
6 Hoffman Estates	321	6 Schaumburg	233
7 Schaumburg	275	7 Naperville	211
8 Bolingbrook	274	8 Dolton	205
9 Naperville	250	9 Calumet City	199
10 Bensenville	250	10 Mount Prospect	169
Top Ten Community Areas in Chicago		Top Ten Community Areas in Chicago	
1 West Ridge	4,093	1 Edgewater	2,108
2 Rogers Park	1,111	2 Uptown	2,046
3 Edgewater	637	3 Rogers Park	1,500
4 Lincoln Square	468	4 West Ridge	614
5 Uptown	351	5 South Shore	489
6 North Park	305	6 Lake View	413
7 Albany Park	256	7 South Chicago	266
8 Near North Side	161	8 Hyde Park	244
9 Lake View	138	9 Chicago Lawn	244
10 O'Hare	138	10 Near North Side	240

*Source:* Paral and Norkewicz 2003

*Notes:* Edgewater, Uptown and Roger's Park are all in the northeastern corner of Chicago



## APPENDIX B.

### *Study Methodology*

The study involved focus groups with parents and one-on-one and small-group interviews with PFA providers. We asked similar questions about access to parents and providers to develop a fuller understanding of the central issues and to identify areas where parents and providers were in agreement, as well as places where their impressions differed. The approach permitted triangulation of the information we received. We were interested in parent and provider perspectives on how well Nigerian and Pakistani immigrant families access PFA, and we were able to probe on the potential barriers among those most affected (parents) and gain insight from providers about their capacity to serve racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse families and the challenges they faced. We conducted the focus groups with parents in October 2008. After preliminary analysis of the parent findings, we conducted interviews with providers in November 2008. We asked providers similar questions about access to their programs but also asked clarifying questions about the programs themselves based on information learned from the parent focus groups. For example, the issue of religious dietary restrictions was raised during the parent focus groups, which we subsequently added to the interview questions with providers.

### **Recruitment of Parent Respondents for the Study**

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We conducted two focus groups with Nigerian parents and two focus groups with Pakistani parents. The study was designed to include one group from each community that consisted of parents with preschool-age children who were currently enrolled in PFA and a second group of parents whose preschoolers were not attending a PFA program. For reasons discussed more below, the groups did not divide neatly into “PFA” and “non-PFA” families as originally intended, but they still provided rich information about potential barriers to participation.

We partnered with two local organizations to recruit families for the study. We searched for community organizations located in two communities on Chicago’s North Side where a large concentration of Nigerian and Pakistani immigrant families live. We intentionally identified organizations that did not offer early childhood programs but that served or had regular contact with Nigerian or Pakistani families with preschool-age children. We did this to increase the

likelihood that the organization would be able to identify families using different types of child education and child care arrangements. Recruitment of Nigerian families was conducted by an organization that provides an after-school program for older children and serves many Nigerian families. Recruitment of Pakistani families was conducted by a community resource and service organization that assists many Pakistani families with young children.

Recruiters filled a vital role for the project as resources trusted by families and as the first introduction families had to the study. We developed detailed recruitment guides for recruiters and instructed them on how to contact families, describe the study, and schedule the focus groups. Despite providing the recruiters with detailed protocols, we relied heavily on recruiters' judgment and relationships with families and encouraged them to modify the recruitment strategies in ways that were most appropriate for locating families. For example, the recruiter of Nigerian families found that study flyers were an effective strategy for recruiting families. In contrast, the recruiter of Pakistani families knew many families personally and preferred to call them directly.

Although the topic of the study was not especially sensitive, we knew that we were recruiting families with unique vulnerabilities including poverty and immigrant status. We knew from the recruiters that because of their fears of dealing with public entities (due to their immigration status), some families would not be comfortable participating in a study. To maintain families' privacy and rights as research participants we followed careful procedures for human subjects' protection that were reviewed by the Urban Institute's Institutional Review Board. It is important to note that even though steps were taken to increase parents' comfort, and parents from all four focus groups reported appreciating the opportunity to share their opinions and talk with other parents, some topics remained difficult to discuss given the single encounter and lack of time to build trust. While rapport was built between the two Urban Institute researchers (both of whom were from the United States, and were not from Pakistan or Nigeria) and the parents, recruiters told us that families were likely to still be reluctant to speak candidly about how long they have lived in the United States or about their fears or distrust of government agencies.

## Identifying Provider Respondents and Provider Characteristics

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PFA providers were identified and recruited differently. Our aim was to speak with selected PFA providers located the neighborhoods where parent respondents lived. Since we did not have parent address information<sup>21</sup> we looked for programs within a two-mile radius of the local recruiting organization. Both recruiters indicated that the parents they worked with were generally within walking distance or a short bus or train ride of the organizations. Once we identified the approximate boundaries surrounding the organizations, we contacted the Chicago Public School System, which administered PFA in Chicago, for a list of school-based and community-based PFA programs surrounding the two recruiting organizations. From those lists we selected three schools and five community-based organizations. The decision was based

largely on their proximity to the recruiting organization and the school or center's familiarity to recruiters (e.g., programs they may have heard families mention). Some community-based organizations have multiple PFA sites on Chicago's North Side, and we interviewed some providers affiliated with the same umbrella agency. Therefore, although we talked to five community-based providers, some were part of the same organization or organizations. This has implications for the findings and the conclusions we draw, which may not be representative of all or even most PFA programs in Chicago.

As mentioned above, we talked with a subset of the PFA providers from five community-based centers<sup>22</sup> and three public schools in the neighborhoods near where our recruiting organizations were located and (presumably) near where parent respondents lived. We conducted five one-on-one and three small-group interviews with between two and four people. In total we spoke to 14 individuals, 5 of whom were either program directors and school principals, 7 of whom were lead teachers, and 2 of whom were assistant teachers. Early childhood teaching and/or administrative experience ranged from between 2 ½ years to over 30 years. Although the PFA program began in 2006, all the organizations and schools had been running preschool, child care, or Head Start programs for several years prior.

## Interview Topics

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We asked parents and providers similar questions about access to early childhood education programs by Nigerian and Pakistani immigrant families. For families currently enrolled in an early childhood education program, we asked how they felt generally about early childhood education, how they learned about the program their child currently attends, and how accessible the program is with respect to supply (e.g., number of programs in the area, waiting lists), location, hours, enrollment, and associated costs or fees. We also asked about the programs' responsiveness to their needs and whether they felt the teachers and administrators were knowledgeable and/or welcoming of their culture, language, or religion. We also asked about any fear of participating in government programs. For families not currently enrolled in an early childhood education program, we asked similar questions about their general feelings about early childhood education programs and whether they had heard about Preschool for All. We also asked about factors such as program accessibility (i.e., location, hours, cost, waiting lists, supply) and how important each was to their decision to participate in a program. We also asked about the importance of a program's responsiveness to their culture, language, or religion, and any fears they may have participating in government programs. In some situations this was somewhat challenging, as some parents did not know about the program, so we had to explain enough about it to help them address the question, but it was still asking them to respond to a hypothetical situation. As a result, it is somewhat less reliable than asking them about actual behaviors.

The provider interviews addressed similar questions about access to PFA by Nigerian and Pakistani immigrant families. Specifically, providers were asked details about their PFA programs such as the enrollment process, hours, waiting lists, and staffing. Questions were also

asked about participation by Nigerian and Pakistani families specifically and whether they were aware of any barriers to their participation including noticeable fears of government programs, issues with costs, or difficulty enrolling due to language, paperwork, or meeting other eligibility requirements.

## Notes

1. Illinois Office of the Governor, "Governor Blagojevich Signs Groundbreaking Preschool for All Legislation," press release July 25, 2006. <http://www.illinois.gov/PressReleases>.
2. Migration Policy Institute, "MPI Data Hub, Migration Facts, Stats and Maps, Illinois Social and Demographic Characteristics," <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/state.cfm?ID=IL#table4>.
3. U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, The American Community Survey, "Illinois S0201 Selected Population Profile in the United States," [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?\\_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201PR&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201T&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201TPR&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_&-tree\\_id=3307&-geo\\_id=04000US17&-search\\_results=01000US&-format=&-\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201TPR&-ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_&-tree_id=3307&-geo_id=04000US17&-search_results=01000US&-format=&-_lang=en). Latin America includes Central and South America as well as Mexico. Also, this report uses the term "Latino immigrant" to refer to immigrants who come from Latin America, though some experts believe that "Latino" should be used only for individuals of Latin American descent who are from the United States.
4. We used several criteria to identify the focal groups, including prevalence in Chicago, diversity of regions of origin, racial diversity, having been identified by local experts as of interest, and whether we were able to identify a trusted local immigrant-serving organization to recruit families into the study.
5. For strategies to simplify access to child care subsidies, see Adams, Snyder, and Banghart (2008).
6. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Clarifying policy regarding limits on the use of Social Security Numbers under the CCDF and the Privacy Act of 1974," ACYF-PI-CC-00-04, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/law/guidance/current/pi0004/pi0004.htm>.
7. Illinois Office of the Governor, "Governor Blagojevich Signs Groundbreaking Preschool for All Legislation," press release July 25, 2006. <http://www.illinois.gov/PressReleases>.
8. Migration Policy Institute, "MPI Data Hub, Migration Facts, Stats and Maps, Illinois Social and Demographic Characteristics," <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/state.cfm?ID=IL#table4>.
9. U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, The American Community Survey 3 Year Estimates "Illinois S0201 Selected Population Profile in the United States," [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?\\_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201PR&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201T&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201TPR&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_&-tree\\_id=3307&-geo\\_id=04000US17&-search\\_results=01000US&-format=&-\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201TPR&-ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_&-tree_id=3307&-geo_id=04000US17&-search_results=01000US&-format=&-_lang=en). Latin America includes Central and South America, as well as immigrants from Mexico. Also, this report uses the term "Latino immigrant" to refer to immigrants who come from Latin America, though some experts believe that "Latino" should be used only for individuals of Latin American descent who are from the United States.
10. Hispanic or Latino of any race makes up 47.9 percent of the foreign-born population in Illinois. U.S. Census Bureau, American Fact Finder, The American Community Survey 3 Year Estimates, "Illinois S0201

Selected Population Profile in the United States,” [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?\\_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201PR&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201T&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_S0201TPR&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_3YR\\_G00\\_-&-tree\\_id=3307&-geo\\_id=04000US17&-search\\_results=01000US&-format=&-\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?_bm=y&-context=ip&-reg=&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_S0201TPR&-ds_name=ACS_2007_3YR_G00_-&-tree_id=3307&-geo_id=04000US17&-search_results=01000US&-format=&-_lang=en).

11. Among the estimated 1,679,074 foreign-born immigrants who reside in the metropolitan Chicago area, 23.5 percent are European, 23.4 percent are Asian, and 49.1 percent are Latin American (from 2007 ACS Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI Metropolitan Statistical Area Selected Social Characteristics in the United States: 2007 [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=31000US16980&-context=adp&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2007\\_1YR\\_G00\\_-&-tree\\_id=307&-\\_lang=en&-\\_caller=geoselect&-format=](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=31000US16980&-context=adp&-ds_name=ACS_2007_1YR_G00_-&-tree_id=307&-_lang=en&-_caller=geoselect&-format=)).
12. One implication is that our study did not talk with Nigerian families where the mother did not work outside the home, so the perspective of these families is not represented in this study.
13. Neil MacFarquhar, “Pakistanis Find U.S. an Easier Fit Than Britain,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2006. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/21/us/21devon.html>.
14. U.S. Census Bureau, “Census 2000 Special Tabulations (STP-159) Table FBP-1. Profile of Selected Demographic and Social Characteristics: 2000.” <http://www.census.gov/population/cen2000/stp-159/STP-159-nigeria.pdf>.
15. For context, wait lists in October for that school year for the three schools we interviewed ranged from less than 20 to 45 students. Most children on the lists were 3-year-olds because 4-year-olds had been given priority.
16. For an in-depth discussion of enrollment challenges faced by immigrant families with early care and education programs, see Matthews and Jang (2007).
17. According to a Chicago Public Schools agency respondent, the PFA enrollment process has been streamlined over the last couple of years to reduce the time families spend registering.
18. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “Clarifying policy regarding limits on the use of Social Security Numbers under the CCDF and the Privacy Act of 1974.” ACYF-PI-CC-00-04, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/law/guidance/current/pi0004/pi0004.htm>.
19. The schedules of several school-based settings meant that the children were unlikely to eat a meal during the program, though they might eat a snack. However, the schools would deal with these issues for older children who stayed for the full school day. The community-based programs, however, were more likely to provide full-time care, which meant that the children would have a meal (or two, depending on whether the program served breakfast) and one or two snacks. Therefore, for this age group, food is a bigger issue for the community-based programs.
20. Exact hours vary somewhat by school or program and may also include afternoon sessions from 12:00 pm to 2:30 pm, or possibly a third shift from around 3:00 pm to 5:30 pm.
21. Our human subjects protections protocol involved no collection of any identifying information (e.g., name, address, date of birth, etc.) from parent respondents. Recruiters were not permitted to share the information with researchers, and were instructed to throw out any parent lists at the conclusion of the focus groups.
22. Although we spoke to providers from five separate PFA sites, some sites were part of the same umbrella organization, which operated according to similar policies and procedures.

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